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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to explore the age-segregation of U.S. children in two situations--children's spontaneous groups and adult-organized activities--and to examine the developmental changes in children's companionship between infancy and adolescence. The companionship of 400 urban children ranging in age from 1 to 12 years was determined by spot observations, phone contacts, and interviews. Results showed that while the likelihood of being with same-age companions increased with age throughout childhood, children were frequently in the company of children who differed in age from themselves by at least 2 years; that the likelihood of being in the company of children increased until 7-8 years and then decreased; and that the likelihood of being with an adult companion decreased significantly over childhood. Results also indicated that adult-organized summer programs were not more age-restricted than children's own groups. Comparisons of a subset of these data to a rural Guatemalan sample demonstrated very similar patterns of age-segregation, suggesting that U.S. children's social contacts are less restricted than many authors assume. (Author/MP)

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AGE-SEGREGATION OF CHILDREN

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A controversy among observers of children's social interactions concerns the extent and advisability of children's contacts with other children of different ages and with adults. Many authors believe that U.S. children are extreme in the degree to which they are segregated from individuals of different ages. The issue is important because contact with individuals of different ages could have differential effects on children's socialization. Whiting (1977) suggests that experience with younger children is important for instilling cooperative and nurturant attitudes, while experience primarily with same-age peers leads to competitiveness and sociable aggressiveness. Bronfenbrenner (1970) is concerned that the age-graded peer groups found in the U.S. may have an antisocial influence on children.

While there is little research to support the view that U.S. children are extremely age-segregated, authors have probably based notions of strict age-segregation on the rigid age-graded systems found in U.S. schools. Because adults are responsible for the organization of children into very age-restricted groups in school, adults possibly advocate and encourage children to play with someone their own age. In contrast, Hartup (1976) suggests that children themselves find same-age peers more reinforcing than children of other ages.

Other authors have noted that, although our educational system is rigidly age-graded, it does not necessarily produce age-segregated peer cultures outside of school (Eisenstadt, 1956; Hartup, 1976; Whiting, 1963). In the Whitings' Six Cultures study, for example, the Orchard Town, U.S. children were often seen in the company of children as much as 3 or 4 years younger or older. The authors noted that strict age-segregation of children in the dispersed population of Orchard Town would leave many children without nearby playmates.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the age-segregation of U.S. children in two situations, children's spontaneous groups and adult-organized activities, and to examine the developmental changes in children's companionship between infancy and adolescence.

METHOD

We studied children ranging in age from 1 to 12 years in a Salt Lake City neighborhood varying in socioeconomic, ethnic, and religious composition. The neighborhood selected was more diverse in all of these characteristics than most areas of Salt Lake City. Metropolitan Salt Lake City has a population of approximately 800,000 with a very warm and dry summer climate. The two-square mile neighborhood we selected represents a typical middle-income residential area of a U.S. city. The types of dwellings range from apartment buildings to large homes, but most of the neighborhood is characterized by small homes with very small yards. The neighborhood includes a shopping center, numerous corner groceries and gas stations, a hospital, one large park, and two elementary schools.

We observed children in three situations: neighborhood, home, and adult-organized summer programs. Companionship in the neighborhood was determined by the method of spot observation. In this method of naturalistic observation, an unobtrusive observer notes information concerning a target individual, usually before the observer's presence has been detected. We recorded information about companionship, activity, sex, and location, and supplemented our observations with questions concerning age, kinship, and distance from home. Interobserver reliability ranged from .95 to 1. The observations were carried out during summer afternoons, Monday through Saturday, from about 1 to 6 p.m., over a period of two months.

We systematically covered the entire neighborhood six times, varying the time of day and day of week that the observations in any one area were made. Each day, a set path for the observer was determined. When a child or group of people were found, we observed one child as the "target" and any other people present were considered "companions." We determined the target child in a group of children

randomly according to color of clothing. All observations known to include a target child who had already been observed were deleted from the analysis.

Information concerning companionship within the home was obtained through phone contacts with parents who served as our spot observers if the children were present. Again, we recorded information regarding the number, age, sex, and kinship status of the companions. Because separate analyses of the neighborhood and home observations revealed comparable results, the two have been combined. More than four hundred 1- to 12-year olds served as our target subjects.

We also interviewed directors of 27 summer programs to obtain information on the degree of age-segregation in adult-organized activities. The programs were selected based on the enrollment of children from the neighborhood, and included day camps, athletic organizations, and school-sponsored classes, among others.

Companionship was defined as two or more persons interacting or involved in the same activity. We broke the ages ranges of children's companions into several categories: same-age, that is, children who are of the same year in age; near-age, children who are within 2 years of age of each other; cross-age, children who are more than 2 years younger or older than some companion; and adults, which included older adolescents and adults. We determined the age category into which an observation was placed by the age difference between the target child and the child companion furthest from the target's age. The data were analyzed by chi square and tested for linear and quadratic trends. The results were analyzed separately by sex; but since no significant differences were found, the data will be reported for the sexes combined.

RESULTS

Figure 1 indicates the percentage of observations in which the children observed in the neighborhood and at home were found with companions of various ages. Our observations indicated that the children were alone in 26% of the observations, with same-age companions 6% of the time, with companions within 2 years of their own age in 29% of the observations, and with children more than 2 years younger or

older than themselves 31% of the time. The children were found in the company of adults in 21% of the observations. These figures do not equal 100% because age of child companion and adult companion categories are not mutually exclusive.

Figure 2 describes the developmental changes in children's companionship with adults and children. The likelihood of being with an adult companion decreases significantly during childhood (F (1,422) = 51.16, $p<.01$), with about one-half of the observations of 1- to 2-year-olds indicating adult companionship and only 5% of the 11- to 12-year-olds being found with adults. The likelihood of being with child companions of any age is represented by a quadratic trend which peaks at age 7-8 years (F (1,422) = 10.80, $p<.01$). At age 7-8, the target subjects were in the company of other children about two-thirds of the time.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the likelihood of being with companions of exactly the same age increases linearly over childhood (F (1,422) = 10.54, $p<.01$), yet even at age 11-12 years, this was only found in slightly more than 10% of the observations. The likelihood of being with companions within 2 years of one's age remains stable throughout childhood. Cross-age companionship, that is, being in the company of children more than 2 years younger or older, is represented by a quadratic trend which peaks, again, at age 7-8 years (F (1,422) = 11.95, $p<.01$).

We also examined the influence of sex of companion and the presence of adults on the companionship of children. When children were found in groups composed of individuals of the same sex, the children were more likely to be within 2 years of each other's age than when found in mixed sex groups ($X^2(1) = 8.76$, $p<.005$).

When the younger children (1- to 4-year-olds) were with adult as well as child companions, they were as likely to be with children more than 2 years younger or older than themselves as with children within 2 years of their own age. After age 5 years, the presence of an adult increased the likelihood that the child companions would differ in age by more than 2 years ($X^2(1) = 9.53$, $p<.005$).

The analysis of the information provided by the interviews with summer program directors did not indicate that adult-organized activities were more age-restricted

than children's spontaneous groups. Figure 4 describes the breakdown of the age ranges used by the programs when grouping children. 15% of the programs grouped children strictly according to a same-age criterion; 11% grouped children differing in age by 1 year; 7% of the programs grouped children differing in age by 2 years; 30% grouped children differing in age by at least 3 years; and 37% of the programs grouped children ranging in age by at least 4 years.

DISCUSSION

In another paper of ours which includes an analysis of a subset of this data (Ellis, Rogoff, & Cromer, 1979), we found few differences in the age-segregation of U.S. and rural Guatemalan 9-year-olds. For example, both groups were found to be alone on about one-fourth of the observations; with just child companions on slightly more than one-half of the observations; and with adults less than 20% of the time. From the present results, it appears that this pattern of companionship holds even when a broader range of ages is studied.

The results we obtained do not support the assumption that U.S. children are extreme in the degree to which they are segregated from individuals of various ages. While we did find an increased likelihood of being with same-age companions with increasing age, throughout childhood, children are frequently in the company of children who differ in age from themselves by at least 2 years. Even at age 11-12 years, the children were as likely to be with cross-age as near-age companions, and were more likely to be with either of these than with companions of exactly their own age. We found that the likelihood of being in the company of children increased until age 7-8 years, and then decreased. It appears that age 9-10 years might be the point at which children attain the initiative and skills needed for more selective interactions with other children. The decreasing contact with other children after age 7-8 is to some extent being replaced by an increase in the amount of time spent alone.

Contrary to our expectations, neither participation in adult-organized activities nor the presence of adults increased the likelihood that children would be in groups

of more restricted ages. It appeared that adults were not overly concerned with grouping children according to age except in activities for which enrollment was very high or some performance level was thought to be a necessary prerequisite, such as in athletic competition. Adults rarely reported making a purposeful effort to form cross-age groups for the benefits the mixed grouping would provide, although that did occur in some instances.

The disagreement between our results and the emphasis in the literature on the age-segregation of U.S. children could be due to several factors. First, it is possible that the authors concerned about U.S. peer culture, while drawing broad conclusions about peer interaction during childhood, have mainly been refering to peer groups which arise during adolescence. We, in contrast, have followed changes in age-segregation from infancy to the beginning of adolescence and only have hints as to what peer interactions during this later period might be like. It is also possible that researchers have overlooked social interactions which take place outside of the school setting, or assumed that the same interactions occur in both settings.

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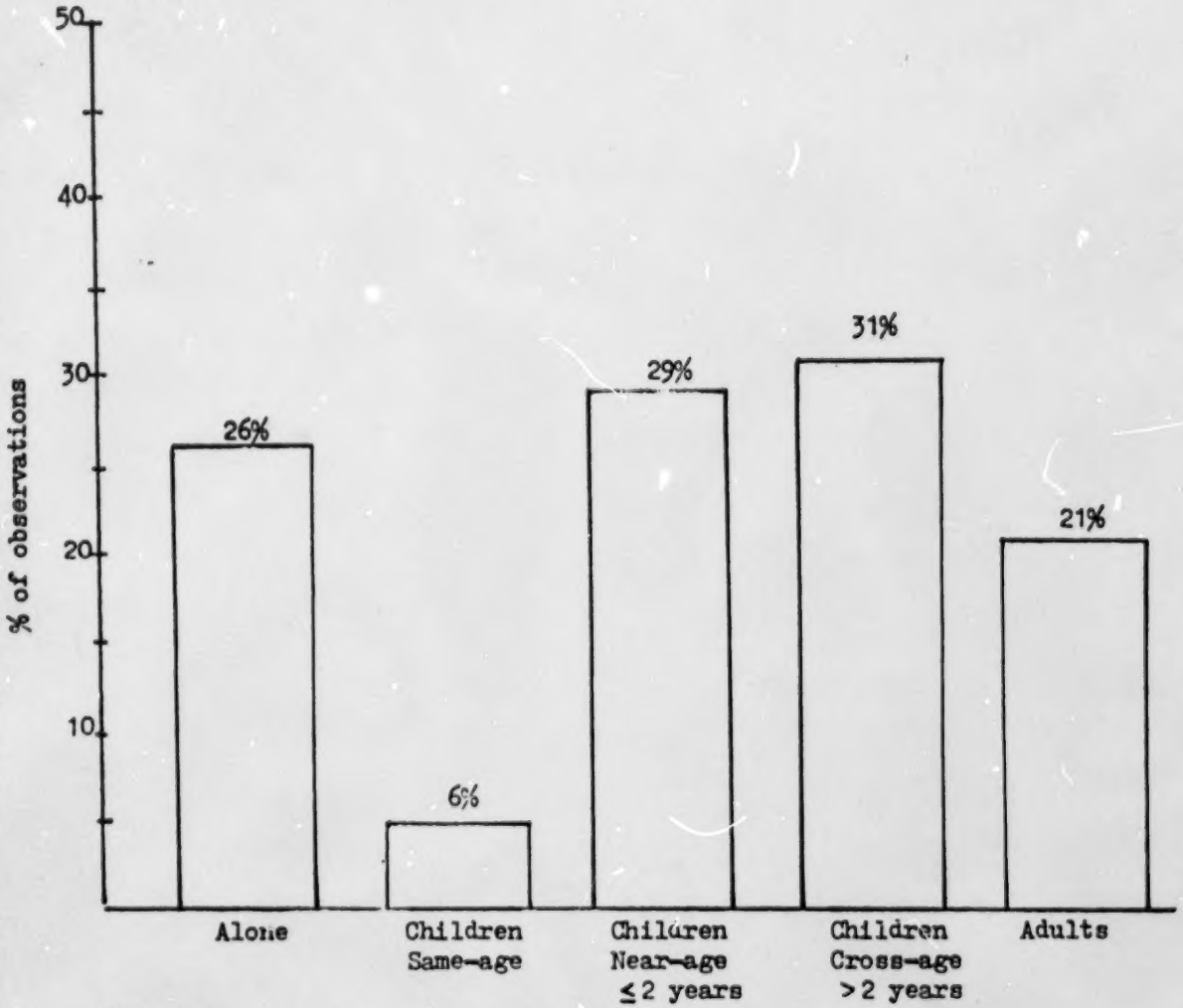

Figure 1.

Age ranges of children's companions. Categories for child and adult companions are not mutually exclusive; the total of the five categories is therefore greater than 100%.

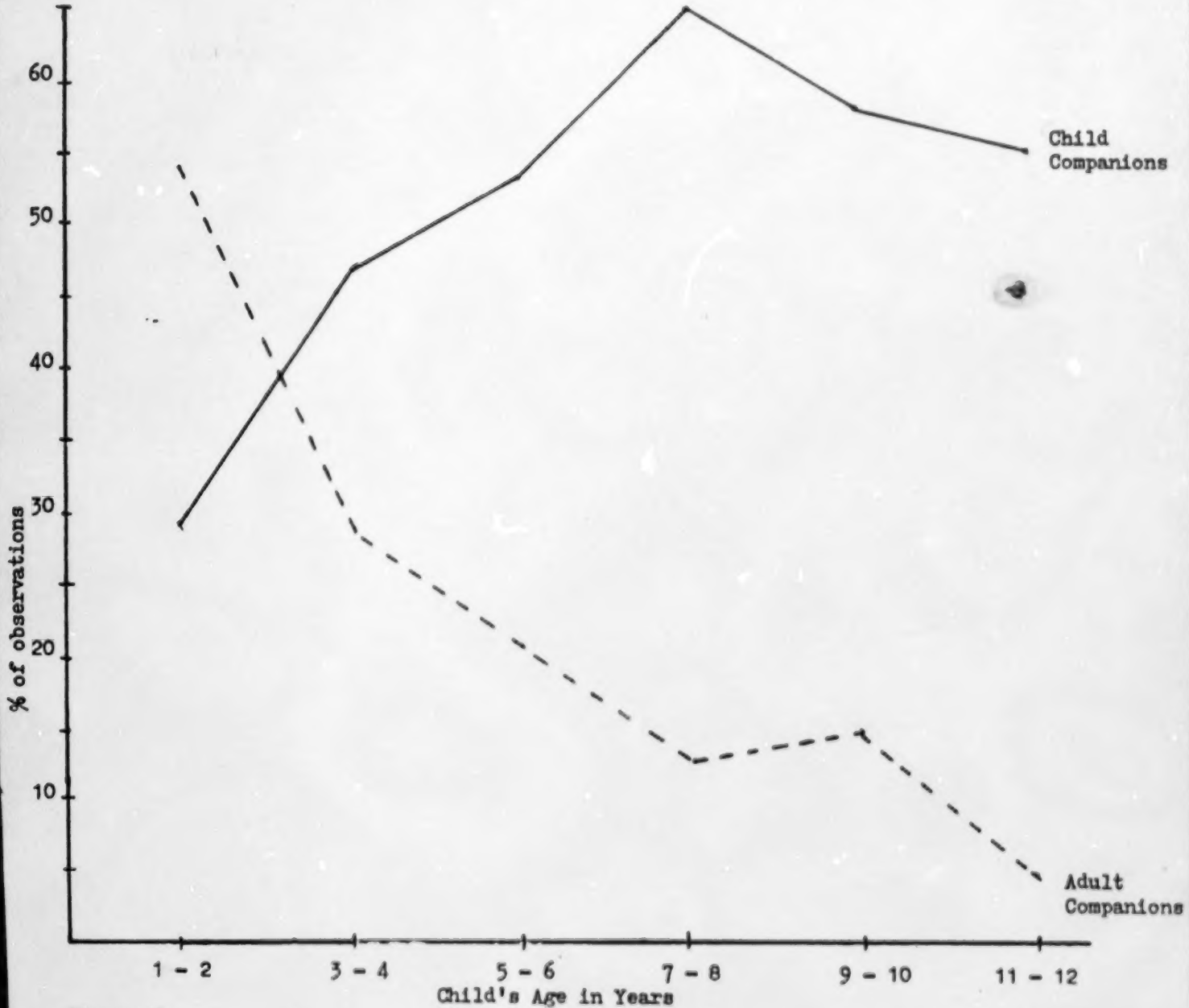

Figure 2.
Developmental changes in children's companionship with adults and children.

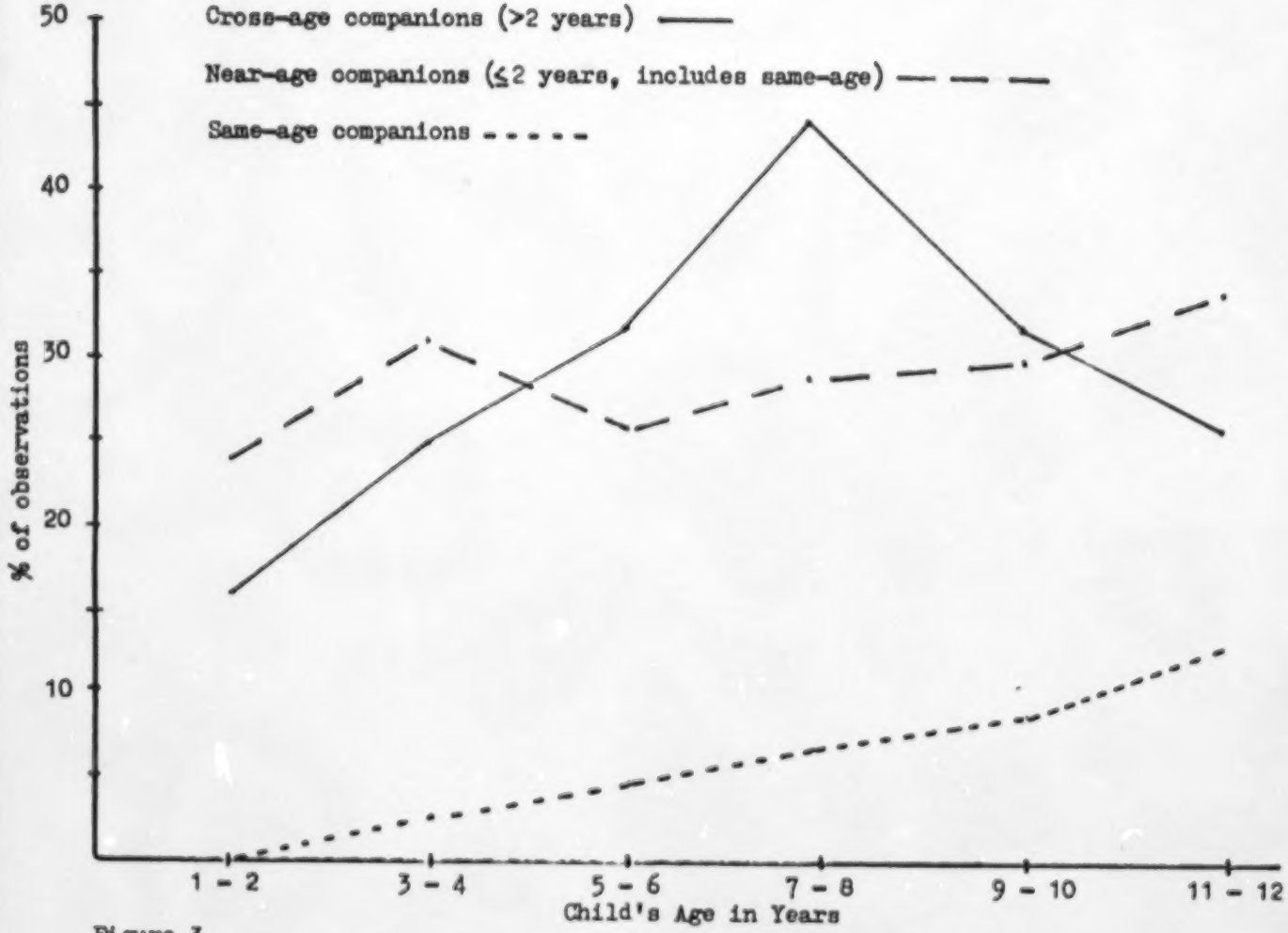

Figure 3.
Developmental changes in children's contact with children of various ages.

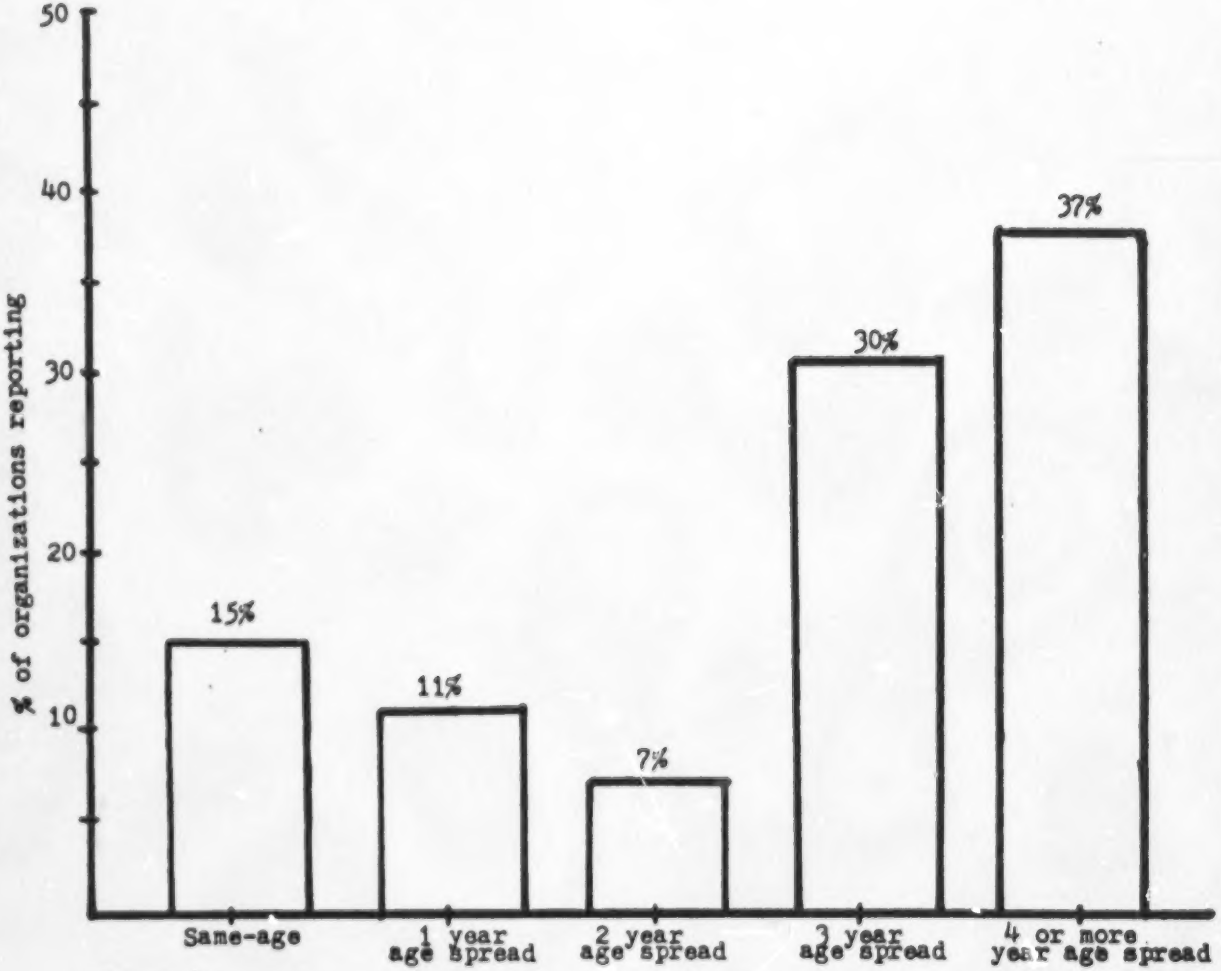

Figure 4.
Age groupings in adult-organized summer programs.